

Arabs and Israelis working together to make desert bloom

By Henry A. Waxman

The seemingly dramatic breakthrough in the Mideast peace process may not be producing the tangible results that many thought it would. Even would-be optimists about the opening of direct talks with the Palestine Liberation Organization are reading the news with increasing skepticism. While Washington was proud to host visiting Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Arens earlier this week, there was little progress made in breaking the current impasse. And a recent New York Times/CBS poll showed the American public to be pessimistic about the chances for peace in the Middle East, believing that the real concessions needed for a settlement will not be made. Meanwhile, the *intifada* lumbers on, driving Israelis and Palestinians ever farther apart.

Yet, within all the violence and uncertainty, within the chaos and cynicism, there are quiet voices of inspiration to be heard. These are the voices of a unique group of

Israelis and Egyptians who are collaborating on tangible science projects. The projects have involved several hundred individuals from more than 50 universities, government agencies and private companies throughout Egypt, Israel and the United States. The individuals work together to tackle health, agricultural and environmental problems common to the region.

While relations between Egypt and Israel have been far from optimal since the heady days of the Camp David accords, the number of enterprising scientists, researchers and agricultural engineers involved with regional cooperation has risen steadily since 1979, the year the Congress passed an amendment calling for such a program. For nearly 10 years, these individuals have worked side by side in labs and in the fields, in conference rooms and in international forums, while Egyptian-Israeli political relations have weathered periods of strain and stability.

Administered by the Agency for International Development, the Middle East Regional Cooperation Program provides grants to participating institutions in Israel, Egypt and the United States. The cooperation is tripartite, and

the results are beyond even the wildest ambitions of many of the program's strongest proponents. The impact of the cooperative work has not only been felt by the forging of new relationships between previous enemies, but in the form of tangible scientific breakthroughs as well.

Pooling together their extensive knowledge on infectious diseases, leading Egyptian and Israeli health scientists have worked on the control of malaria and other parasitic diseases. Most recently, they have undertaken a project aimed at controlling filariasis. These insect-borne diseases were chosen because they affect populations in the region and have the potential of spreading into adjoining areas. These same medical researchers worked together to quell an outbreak of the deadly, mosquito-borne Rift Valley Fever, which, in 1979, killed many hundred people and 3 million head of livestock.

Another project has cross-bred two different kinds of goats to produce a new desert goat that yields more milk and more meat, and is better able to survive in a dry environment than previous species. New technologies are being used to provide a less expensive food source for the

goats as an alternative to the costly grains that have been used for feed until now.

Marine-science experts are collaborating on ocean-related technologies and ways to protect the erosion of the shoreline, a serious problem faced by many ocean-bordered countries around the world. On the agricultural front, researchers have come up with a strain of tomato that is able to flourish in brackish waters common to the desert regions in Egypt and Israel. Arabs and Jews are actually working together to make the desert bloom.

This small effort has broken fortress-like barriers between Egyptian and Israeli scientists — at a cost of less than one tenth of 1 percent of our aid program to the two countries. But even this modest and successful program has been severely threatened by budgetary battles at several points in recent years.

Even when the political environment was stormy, and even during periods of uncertainty about future funding for the program, Egyptians and Israelis continued to make headway in their research. During the past months, throughout the Middle East turmoil, the participants in regional cooperation showed no signs of

letting up on their tenacity and commitment. From Cairo to Jerusalem, scientists were convening regularly to further their work on everything from plant solarization to dairy husbandry. In fact, Egyptian and Israeli epidemiologists traveled to Washington in December to deliver a joint paper to the American Society of Tropical Medicine.

In recent weeks, Egyptians, Israelis and Americans have come forward with fresh ideas for collaborative projects under the Middle East Regional Cooperation program. At a time when Congress is rightly scrutinizing the U.S. foreign-aid program, new ways must be found to nurture regional cooperation and increase its budget. Few efforts in U.S. foreign aid have been as successful.

Voices of pessimism will ring on in the Middle East. The fiery and frustrated youth of Nablus may not lay down their stones in the coming weeks. But there is much to be learned from efforts such as the Middle East Regional Cooperation Program that are aimed at making peace work in quiet ways. This kind of program should be encouraged, even at, or especially during, times of uncertainty for diplomatic success. ■

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